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Nixon-Khrushchev Conversation, 26 July 1959

After about one-half hour of casual table talks Khrushchev launched the serious phase of the conversation with a discourse on Soviet rocket and atomic prowess. He said that he had a long session yesterday with Soviet scientists who had presented plans to him for launching rockets into the earth's orbit with a payload of 100 tons. This, he said, was sufficient for all kinds of instrumentation, it was also sufficient to carry man and equipment for his return to earth. This project was only in the planning stage at present, but solidly based and clearly realizable without difficulty. He then referred to the accuracy of modern missiles, citing a Soviet ICBM launching about a week ago over a 7000 kilometer course with a final deviation off target of 1.7 kilometers in distance and less than 1.4 kilometers to the right. However, he continued, accidents were always possible. In this connection, he wanted to divulge a secret: a month ago the Soviet Government had been very worried when an ICBM of this same type (Mikoyan contradicted him at this point and said that this was a different missile) had a malfunction in the engine cut off system and had overshoot its intended course by 2000 kilometers. The Soviet Government had feared it might land in Alaska but fortunately it fell into the Ocean. While this missile had carried no warhead, its accidental landing in Alaska, he realized, could have created a grave incident. Khrushchev said that he

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supposed that we had monitored these shots. In fact, he said, he knew that we did and confirmed that the Soviets do too. The Vice President pointed out that in this field it was very difficult for great nations to do things that are not known to the other side, to which Khrushchev agreed. The Vice President said that this was the reason why the U.S. had been happy to show Mr. Tupolev our missile production--the U.S. felt that no secrets had been revealed.

The Vice President noted that Mr. Kozlov had been invited to observe missile launchings at the Vandenburg and Cape Canaveral launching sites, but had not availed himself of that opportunity.

Khrushchev said that he knew about that, but the USSR felt that the time was not yet ripe for such things. The proper time for such visits would come after the U.S. bases had been liquidated--then the USSR would show the U.S. its launching sites and missiles. The reason for this was a simple one: U.S. bases are some 300 kilometers from the borders of the USSR, while the USSR is several thousand kilometers away from the U.S.

The Vice President observed that this situation was a two-way street and then referred to Khrushchev's statement to Mr. Harriman to the effect that the USSR had given China missiles to shell Quemoy.

Khrushchev denied this and asserted that all he had said was that the USSR would supply China with missiles if it were attacked.

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by the U.S. He also said that in view of the insignificant distance of 70 kilometers between the Chinese mainland and Formosa, the USSR could, if necessary, supply China with a large number of missiles capable of covering that distance, but again asserted that at the present time the USSR was not furnishing missiles to anyone.

The Vice President then referred to the high cost of missiles, stating that it was unfortunate that so much money had to be spent for building missiles, when the money needed to build one missile could buy 153,000 TV sets, or endow several universities, or buy shoes for several million children.

Khrushchev expressed surprise at these figures and said that the U.S. missile production was too expensive and that it was much cheaper in the USSR. He went on to say that, as he had told Mr. Harriman, the USSR was in possession of "U.S. operational plans," the authenticity of which, of course, was not certain in view of possible U.S. counterintelligence operations, and that it was possible that the U.S. had Soviet operational plans too. Soviet specialists, he said, had told him that to paralyze vital centers in the U.S., as well as in Europe, Asia, i.e., the U.S. bases on these two continents, rockets, costing a total of 30 billion rubles were needed. This figure was based on the Soviet missile production costs, and it had been reported accurately by Mr. Harriman. He added that this figure included the cost of both ICBMs, which were the most expensive, and IRBMs as well.

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The Vice President inquired whether Mr. Khrushchev was referring to what the Soviet Union had or what it needed.

Khrushchev replied that this was what the USSR had. (However there was at this point considerable discussion between Soviet leaders and interpreters. Consensus of Russian-speaking Americans present was that Khrushchev was talking in terms of present Soviet capabilities rather than of actual stocks of missiles already on hand.)

The Vice President then remarked that this meant that the USSR had 3 billion dollars worth of missiles to knock out vital centers of the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

Khrushchev replied that ICBMs would be used only against the U.S., while the U.K., Germany, and even Spain could be hit with IRBMs, i.e., missiles with a range of 2000 kilometers; the next higher range of ballistic missiles, he added, was 4000 kilometers.

The Vice President then commented that, as far as the U.S. was concerned, the main cost was involved in launching sites rather than in missiles proper, and inquired whether this was also true in the USSR.

Khrushchev replied in the negative, saying that launching pads were cheap and that the USSR was building mobile launching pads so that they could change positions.

The Vice President asked Mr. Khrushchev whether mobile launching platforms were built for use in the air or land.

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Khrushchev replied that they were not intended for use in the air.

The Vice President then wondered why the Soviet Union continued to build bombers when ICBMs were available.

Mr. Khrushchev said that the Soviet Union had almost stopped the production of bombers. Bombers and fighter aircraft were being built only in numbers sufficient to maintain the training of Soviet air personnel so that this investment would not be lost. He said that perhaps these bombers could be useful for some limited purpose, but it was not likely. Missiles were much more accurate and not subject to human failure of human emotion. He said that humans were frequently incapable of dropping bombs on assigned targets because of emotional revulsion, a factor not present in missiles. He cited an incident in World War II when Russian bomber crews had claimed to have hit an advanced target, but when the territory in question was recovered the target was found intact because the personnel involved had simply jettisoned their bombs harmlessly without even reaching the target area. Khrushchev went on to say that he felt really sorry for the Navy, it being an obsolete element in arms, which could only provide "fodder for sharks." In view of their slow speed, cruisers and aircraft carriers were completely useless, "sitting ducks," and the USSR had stopped building them.

The Vice President observed that Khrushchev apparently did not include submarines in his analysis of modern naval capabilities,

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since the Soviets had been reported to be building submarines in quantities.

Khrushchev confirmed the Soviets were building as many submarines as they could. However, Mikoyan intervened at this point and said "as many as needed."

The Vice President commented that submarines were highly useful for launching missiles and that they would be particularly useful when solid fuel had been developed.

Khrushchev agreed but said that the Soviets believed that launching from land was much better than from the sea.

The Vice President observed that this depended on the strategic situation of the nation involved.

Mr. Khrushchev then said that he wanted to reveal another secret--submarines would be used by the USSR for destroying ports, suburban areas [sic] and the Navy of the enemy. Destruction of the enemy's Navy would paralyze his sea communications, a factor which would be of great importance, since the Soviet Union's potential enemy would be slightly dependent on sea communications. He said that Soviet submarines would carry ballistic missiles and anti-vessel rockets, the range of which was now 600 kilometers, but would be increased to 1000 kilometers in the future. The latter range, according to Soviet scientists, would be entirely sufficient.

The Vice President then pointed out that the main problem in

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missiles was fuel and said that the USSR had been reported as having made good progress in this field, which was evidenced by ~~the~~ thrusts it had attained. It was obvious that the future called for the development of solid fuels, which were easier to store and maintain in readiness. Solid fuel would particularly answer the problem of submarine-carried missiles.

Khrushchev confirmed that the Soviet Union had attained success in the development of rocket fuels, saying that without that its achievements in rocketry would not have been possible. However, he declined to discuss the question of solid fuels, saying that this was a technical subject which he, being a politician rather than a technician, was not qualified to discuss.

The Vice President then referred to Mr. Khrushchev's statements in Albania, in which he had said that it was better to station intermediate range rockets in Albania than in the USSR. Since press reports may be interpreted in different ways, the Vice President said, it would be interesting to know what Mr. Khrushchev actually had in mind.

Khrushchev said that the U.S. had made arrangements for stationing missiles in Italy, arrangements which were directed against the USSR rather than, say Africa. The USSR has to paralyze these missiles and he believed that the best place for stationing Soviet missiles would be Albania. The distances between Albania and Italy is only 300 kilometers and thus the

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Soviet Union would not have to expend its longer-range missiles or endanger neutral territory. When the Vice President interjected, "or without danger to yourselves from fallout," Khrushchev dismissed this as another question. Italy and Greece could be hit best from Albania and Bulgaria, while Turkey could be hit from the territory of the USSR and Bulgaria. It was this that he had in mind, although he had not mentioned Turkey in the statement referred to by the Vice President. However, he added at present the Soviet Union had no bases in these two countries. They would be established in Albania when U.S. bases were established in Italy and in Bulgaria when U.S. bases were established in Greece.

The Vice President then asked whether the Soviets made a distinction between collective security arrangements such as NATO and the individual nations belonging to NATO.

Khrushchev said yes, but the individual members of such arrangements had to make a decision about bases if they wanted to avoid becoming missile targets. If some individual country decided not to accept rockets, the Soviet Union would not hit it with its own missiles.

The Vice President observed that Khrushchev frequently made public statements on the subject of missiles, including the question of their delivery to China. When people in the west read some such statements it was possible that they got an impression which Khrushchev did not intend. He said that today

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Mr. Khrushchev was apparently simply relating his estimate of the strength the USSR possesses and how this strength would resist any attack or how the USSR would counterattack. However, when such talk is published throughout the world it frequently creates the impression of a deliberate attempt to threaten other countries. Taking into account the attitude toward peace of the people of the U.S. as well as other nations, these statements could be misunderstood. The Vice President said that he did not know the strength of the U.S. as well as the President, who was highly competent in the military field and could discuss these matters at length. Mr. Khrushchev, of course, also knows the strength of the USSR very well. However, the U.S. has, as Khrushchev knows, considerable power but it does not want to have to use it. No war, regardless of who starts it, can be prevented from causing disaster to the entire world, because even a sudden blow could not eliminate the retaliatory power of the other side. As to the U.S. and the USSR, their respective advantages could not be decisive, i.e., they both must recognize that they are both strong, that they have the necessary will and that their peoples are strong. Neither of the two countries should look down upon the other; and if there is natural respect then the two countries can create a basis for the negotiations necessary for reducing existing world problems and for bringing about a reduction in armed forces, which is desired by both sides. The Vice President


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continued by saying that in his statements to the press as well as in his public statements he would make no reference to the balance of power between the U.S. and the USSR, but would rather emphasize that both nations are powerful and that they have to see to it that the future is that of peace rather than of war. Both nations have leaders who know war and want peace at heart. The Vice President emphasized that he was not saying that a settlement of differences would be easy, but still both sides must exert every effort toward this end.

Mr. Khrushchev expressed full agreement as to the Vice President's estimate of the correlation of forces as between the two powers. He denied that Soviet leaders had ever made statements to the effect that the Soviet Union could destroy the United States without suffering losses itself. But some American generals had said that the U.S. could wipe out the Soviet Union in no time. (The Vice President indicated dissent, but Khrushchev held the floor.) He then continued to say that he would reveal another secret. The Vice President was undoubtedly familiar with Marshal Vershinin's famous interview about a year ago on Soviet capabilities of destruction. It was he, Khrushchev, who had dictated that interview. He had been on vacation at that time and had summoned the Marshal and a secretary in order to dictate that interview. The Soviet Government could not let pass in silence certain statements by U.S. generals and the Presidium had carefully


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considered at what level their reply should be issued. Finally it chose Vershinin, Chief of the Soviet Air Force, to equate with the sources of U.S. threats. A statement by one of the Ministers or by the Chief of Staff would not have been appropriate because it could have been misunderstood by the other side. The Soviet Government as such had never made statements comparable to statements by such U.S. generals. Such statements were irresponsible because the other side might misunderstand them. [The Vershinin statement referred to appears to be a four-column interview with the Commander-in-chief of the Soviet Air Forces by a PRAVDA correspondent published in the PRAVDA of Sunday, Sept. 8, 1957, summarized as follows by Embassy Moscow at that time:

"Primary emphasis on (1) annihilative nature of another general war; (2) U.S. 'stupidity' evidenced by Generals and Admirals who say Soviet Union could be destroyed in several hours; (specific reference to General Norstad, Admiral Burke and Field Marshal Montgomery); (3) rocket warfare nature of next war, Soviet superior offensive ability with such weapons, and charge that there is no defense against rockets; (4) ulterior motives, particularly adverse to U.S. military partners, of U.S. plan for world supremacy; (5) ulterior motives of U.S. monopolies and military leaders for continuation of arms race; (6) necessity follow Soviet standard disarmament proposals."

Khrushchev then said that it would be very easy for the USSR

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to destroy Europe and also mentioned that there would be no need for pinpoint missile accuracy, since accuracy with a 100 kilometer tolerance would be entirely adequate. He then cited a joke he understood to be current in England about pessimists and optimists. The pessimists said only 6 atomic bombs would be needed to wipe out the U.K., while the optimists said 9 or 10 would be required. Referring again to Turkey, Khrushchev said that, while being a poor, hungry country of beggars, it was a U.S. base. The USSR held no naval forces in the Black Sea because Turkish territory as well as the entire sea could be covered with missiles and missile carriers. This was why the Soviet Union could not understand why the U.S. held to its bases. Perhaps the purpose was to divert the Soviet Union's nuclear power to the countries where U.S. bases are maintained. Mikoyan interjected that the purpose of U.S. bases was "political domination." Khrushchev said, "If you intend to make war on us, I understand; if not, why do you keep them?"

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